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Integrating Experiential Learning into the Merdeka Curriculum for Early Childhood Education in Indonesia

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Abstract
This study investigates the integration of experiential learning within the Merdeka Curriculum for early childhood education in Indonesia through a descriptive qualitative method using a systematic literature review of 126 national and international journal articles published between 2017 and 2024. Articles were selected using keyword combinations experiential learning, Merdeka curriculum, and early childhood education from accessible databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and DOAJ, and reviewed through four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The study examines how experiential learning strategies can enhance holistic development in young children by fostering active engagement, critical thinking, creativity, and socio-emotional growth. Findings indicate that experiential learning supports child-centered education when teachers are adequately trained, technology is effectively used, and community involvement is encouraged. However, challenges include inconsistent teacher competencies, lack of infrastructure, and limited policy support. The review emphasizes the need for contextualized teacher training and adaptive education policies. By offering evidence-based insights, this study contributes to best practices and policy recommendations for early childhood education in Indonesia, positioning experiential learning as a transformative approach to prepare a confident, creative, and compassionate generation.
Keyword: *Merdeka Curriculum, Early Childhood Education, Integrating Experiential Learning*

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Introduction
Early childhood education (ECE) is a very crucial stage in a child's development, as during this period children experience rapid physical, emotional, social and cognitive development. One approach that is getting more attention in ECE is the application of experiential learning, which emphasizes the importance of direct experience as the basis for meaningful learning. In Indonesia, education reform through the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum aims to provide teachers and schools with the flexibility to design a curriculum that is relevant to local and national needs, including in the ECD context. This research aims to explore the application of experiential learning in Merdeka Curriculum in early childhood education in Indonesia, with the hope that it can contribute to the development of a curriculum that is more effective and in accordance with children's developmental needs.

Experiential learning is an educational approach that emphasizes the importance of direct experience as the basis for meaningful learning. The concept is rooted in learning theories promoted by philosophers such as John Dewey and David Kolb. According to Kolb (Fourcade & Go, 2012; Rini

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& Indah, 2023; Hu, 2023; Susiloningsih, Sumantri, & Marini, 2023; Bachevanova-Georgieva, 2024; Aithal & Mishra, 2024), experiential learning is defined as an action to achieve something based on experience that continuously changes in order to increase the effectiveness of learning outcomes. Experiential learning serves as a dynamic teaching strategy that emphasizes active student engagement through direct experience, reflection, and real-world application, aiming to deepen understanding and foster meaningful learning outcomes (Pherson-Geyser, De Villiers, & Kavai, 2020; Kong, 2021; Cheng, 2022). As teacher, mastering pedagogical knowledge in initial teacher training is essential to ensure that prospective teachers are equipped with the theoretical foundations and practical strategies necessary to design effective learning environments, respond to diverse student needs, and facilitate meaningful educational experiences (Nicu, 2017; Uyen, Tong, & Lien, 2022; Kolb & Kolb, 2018).

The implementation of experiential learning can be done through various methods such as learning projects, case studies, simulations, role-playing, and field activities (Schunk, 2012; Wooding, 2019; Thu, Chung, & Nam, 2024; Gobeil et al., 2024). The impact of five experiential practices autonomy support, stimulation, emotional support, time for choice activities, and interest-based activities along with the moderating role of initial language and arithmetic achievement, was explored to assess their influence on children's school adjustment (De Bilde et al., 2015; -Wheeler et al., 2022; Šalkauskaitė, 2021; Hu, 2023; Rini & Indah, 2023; Rashid et al., 2024; Huong, 2024). These activities are designed to facilitate learning through hands-on experience, promoting critical thinking, problem solving, and other 21st-century skills.

Kolb's experiential learning model consists of four stages (Kolb, 2018): (1) concrete experience, (2) observation and reflection, (3) formation of abstractions, and (4) test of new experiences. This cycle helps students develop better than conventional teacher-centered methods by providing a more dynamic and real-world approach to learning. The stages of Kolb's model include (Kolb, 2018; Fourcade & Go, 2012; Girvan, Conneely, & Tangney, 2016; Ogunseemi & Idowu, 2023; Motta & Galina, 2023): **Concrete Experience**: In this stage, students are motivated and stimulated to engage in an activity, **Reflective Observation**: Students reflect on their experiences, discussing and documenting them to deepen understanding, **Abstract Conceptualization**: After reflection, students generalize the concepts learned from their experience and analyze them in broader contexts, and **Active Experimentation**: Students apply the abstract concepts in new situations, testing their relevance and validity.

This model is particularly effective in fostering problem-solving skills, as students are directly involved in the learning process. By engaging in real-world experiences, students are encouraged to think critically and develop practical solutions. The teacher's role is to facilitate these learning processes by encouraging active participation, providing learning opportunities, helping students reflect on their experiences, and assisting them in applying new concepts.

The Merdeka Curriculum is an educational initiative introduced by the Indonesian government to reform the education system. It allows schools to have greater flexibility in designing a curriculum that fits local and national needs, while also encouraging innovation and creativity in the teaching process (Irbah, Ichsan, & Fauziah, 2022; Nursaputri & Sabat, 2023; Zidan & Qamariah, 2023; Utami, Gumilar & Lestari, 2024). The main principles of the Merdeka Curriculum include academic freedom, relevance to contemporary needs, and a focus on character development, aligned with the values of Pancasila, the foundation of the Republic of Indonesia.

One of the key goals of the Merdeka Curriculum is to foster 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. These skills are essential in preparing students to succeed in a rapidly changing digital world (Hasibuan et al, 2022; Kwan, 2022; Irawati et al., 2023; Yafie et al., 2024). The curriculum is designed to promote active and meaningful learning experiences, like those advocated in the *experiential learning* model (Novitaningrum, 2023; Marthawati & Setyo, 2024; Mewilda, 2024). By offering flexibility and emphasizing student-centered learning, the Merdeka Curriculum supports a more dynamic educational environment where students can engage in hands-on, real-world learning activities (Zidan & Qamariah, 2023; Ndari & Mahmudah, 2023; Rakhman & Surur, 2024; Aji, 2023; Wijayanti, Promono, & Handoyo, 2024).

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The Merdeka Curriculum also emphasizes the importance of character development, particularly through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project. This initiative seeks to instill values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and social care, contributing to the holistic development of students. Although the curriculum has been gradually implemented since 2021, the government continues to evaluate and adjust its application to ensure that it meets the educational needs of all students, particularly in remote and disadvantaged areas.

In Indonesia, early childhood education (PAUD) plays a crucial role in the development of young children, particularly during the golden age of 0-6 years. The government's policy emphasizes that PAUD should not be achievement-oriented but should focus on the development of attitudes, interests in learning, and basic competencies. According to Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) principles, PAUD programs should be designed based on the developmental needs of children and should be adaptable to individual differences and the social and cultural contexts in which children live (NAEYC, 1997; Santrock, 2009; Erikson, 2010).

The Indonesian government has established regulations for early childhood education, ensuring that it is accessible through formal, non-formal, and informal channels. Formal PAUD institutions include kindergartens (TK) and Raudhatul Atfal (RA), while non-formal institutions include playgroups (KB) and daycare centers (TPA) (Kemdikbud, 2003). The implementation of early childhood education in Indonesia also incorporates religious values, reflecting the country's cultural and religious diversity.

The principles of DAP are crucial in ensuring that early childhood education is tailored to the developmental needs of each child. According to Copple & Bredekamp (2006), there are three core aspects of DAP: (1) knowledge of child development, (2) understanding of individual children, and (3) awareness of the social and cultural contexts in which children live. This ensures that educational experiences are meaningful, relevant, and respectful of each child's unique background.

The principles of *experiential learning* align closely with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in the context of early childhood education. Both approaches emphasize the importance of active, hands-on learning experiences that promote critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. In the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers are encouraged to design learning experiences that allow children to engage directly with their environment, fostering a deeper understanding of the world around them.

In early childhood education, experiential learning can take the form of play-based activities, field trips, role-playing, and other interactive methods that engage children's senses and stimulate their curiosity. These activities not only support cognitive development but also contribute to social, emotional, and moral growth, in line with the values promoted by the Merdeka Curriculum (Nugraha, 2022; Kolb, 2015; Bartle, 2015; Anggraini & Dewi, 2023).

By integrating *experiential learning* into the Merdeka Curriculum, educators can create a more dynamic and engaging learning environment that caters to the diverse needs of young learners in Indonesia. This approach ensures that children are not just passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in their own learning process. Although the principles of experiential learning and the Merdeka Curriculum are theoretically aligned both emphasizing active, student-centered learning that promotes holistic development there is still a lack of empirical research that explores how experiential learning is specifically implemented in early childhood education settings in Indonesia. Existing literature tends to focus on general education levels, such as primary or secondary education, with limited attention to PAUD institutions, especially in diverse socio-cultural and geographic contexts. Furthermore, practical guidance for PAUD educators on integrating experiential learning within the flexible framework of the Merdeka Curriculum remains underdeveloped. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the implementation of experiential learning in early childhood education under the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia, aiming to contribute both theoretical insights and practical recommendations for curriculum design, teacher training, and policy formulation.

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Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method with a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach (Creswell, 1998; Creswell & Guetherman, 2019). According to Creswell, qualitative research is used to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems, which aligns with the aim of this study to investigate experiential learning practices in early childhood education within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia.

The inclusion criteria were: (1) relevance to early childhood education and experiential learning in the Indonesian context; (2) published in reputable national or international journals; and (3) accessible full-text documents. The review followed the PRISMA protocol (Moher et al., 2015; Page et al., 2021; Acuyo, 2022), which includes four phases: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify patterns, themes, and subthemes regarding the implementation, benefits, and challenges of experiential learning in the Merdeka Curriculum.

Identification

A total of 100 peer-reviewed journal articles and government reports published between 2017 and 2024 were systematically reviewed. Sources were obtained through Google Scholar, Scopus, and national repositories using keywords such as “experiential learning,” “Merdeka Curriculum,” and “early childhood education”. This comprehensive identification was designed to capture wide range of studies addressing to the integrating experiential learning into Merdeka curriculum in Indonesia. The identification process was iterative, with refinements made to ensure the inclusion of all relevant studies.

Screening

During screening phase, duplicate record were removed, resulting in 35 unique articles. These articles were then subjected to a preliminary review based on their titles and abstracts to assess their relevance to the research topic. Article that did not focus on early childhood education, experiential learning, or Merdeka curriculum were excluded at this stage.

Eligibility

In the eligibility phase, 30 full text articles were assessed in detail to determain wether they met the predefined inclusion criteria. These criteria included: 1) The study must focus on early childhood education in Indonesia. 2) It must discuss experiential learning either as a central theme or as significant component. 3) The articles must be published in a peer-reviewed national or international journal. 4) The full text must be accessible for in-depth analysis. After this assessment, 14 articles were excluded due to reasons such as lack of methodological rigor, insufficient relevance, or focus on unrelated educational levels. However, an additional 2 articles were included through backward reference searching (snowballing, resulting in a final total of 18 articles included in the qualitative synthesis.

Inclusion

Eighteen articles were included in the qualitative synthesis, offering comprehensive insights into the implementation, benefits, and challenges of experiential learning within the Merdeka Curriculum for early childhood education. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify key patterns, themes, and subthemes that informed the study’s finding and discussion.

Results and Discussion

The findings from this research provide significant insights into the implementation of experiential learning in Early Childhood Education (ECE) under the Merdeka Curriculum. These findings align with existing literature on the benefits of experiential learning, while also revealing

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challenges that need to be addressed for full integration. Figure 1 is a detailed discussion of the results, framed through a comparative lens and enriched by the feedback from the editor.
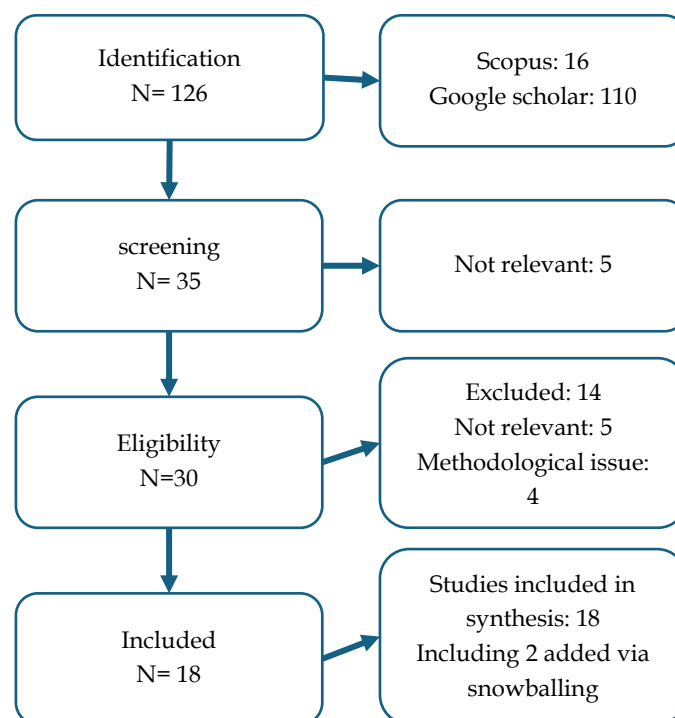
Figure 1. Systematic Literature Review Flowchart adapted from PRISMA (Page et al., 2021)

Cognitive Development

This study demonstrates that experiential learning plays a crucial role in cognitive development, particularly in vocabulary recognition, numerical understanding, and science concepts. The positive impact on language skills aligns (Tinarti et al.,2022; Rahayu et al.,2019), who found that experiential learning can significantly improve children's ability to recognize vocabulary. Similarly, the study reveals that experiential learning enhances children's comprehension of mathematical concepts, particularly numbers (Rahayu et al., 2019; Suryani et al., 2018; Aji, 2023).

However, a critical challenge noted in the findings is the resistance children display towards experiential learning. Many children, accustomed to traditional pencil-and-paper tasks, often fail to recognize non-traditional learning activities as valid educational experiences. This resistance is also echoed in the works of Dewey and Kolb, whose experiential learning theories suggest that children need to move beyond passive learning to engage in active exploration and reflection (Enache, 2023). The misconception that learning occurs only through written tasks can limit children's engagement with more dynamic learning models. These cultural and developmental challenges require careful consideration, especially in a transition period where children may need time to adjust to new forms of learning (Hikmah, Afif, & Ayuningrum, 2021; Christina & Watini, 2022; Hasan et al., 2023).

Skill Acquisition

The study highlights the development of both soft and hard skills as an outcome of experiential learning, underscoring the holistic nature of this approach. The development of entrepreneurial skills, as pointed out by Hasan et al. (2023), is particularly significant, as it prepares children for future challenges in a rapidly changing world. Moreover, experiential learning fosters better health and safety practices, contributing to the well-being of children (Suryaningsih et al., 2020; Trejbalova, Belisle, & Salisbury, 2022; Tinarti, Purnamasari, & Handayani, 2022; Rini & Indah, 2023).

This finding resonates with global research that emphasizes the importance of experiential learning in developing critical life skills, such as problem-solving, creativity, and teamwork

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(Ngkunda et al., 2023). However, the study also identifies that teachers' understanding of experiential learning remains limited, hindering the full potential of the model (Mak, Lau & Alan, 2017; Latif & Sirait, 2022; Tarida et al., 2022; Aji, 2023) emphasize that teacher professional development is critical for the successful implementation of experiential learning. The lack of training and unfamiliarity with the model are significant barriers that must be addressed to ensure that teachers can effectively facilitate this type of learning. Furthermore, the alignment of experiential learning with the Merdeka Curriculum highlights the need for educators to focus not just on academic skills but also on personal and social development, as proposed by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (2020a).

Curriculum Implementation

Experiential learning provides a more practice-oriented approach to teaching and learning, which aligns closely with the Merdeka Curriculum's goals of fostering creativity and innovation (Ngkunda et al., 2023). This finding is consistent with Agusniatih et al. (2023), who argue that the Merdeka Curriculum boosts children's motivation and enthusiasm for learning. However, challenges such as the lack of teaching materials and media to facilitate experiential activities are prevalent. Underscore the importance of creative media development to support the hands-on nature of experiential learning (Rahma et al., 2023; Kharimah et al., 2023).

This study highlights that while the Merdeka Curriculum promotes innovation, teachers often face significant challenges in preparing creative learning materials. Without proper resources and support, the potential for experiential learning to enhance the educational experience is compromised. This challenge is not unique to Indonesia; many countries undergoing curriculum reforms in early childhood education face similar issues (Suryani et al., 2018;: Nursaputri, 2023; Utami, Gumilar & Lestari, 2024; Irbah, Ichsan & Fauziah, 2022). A more integrated approach, where educators receive adequate support from schools and the government, is essential to overcome these limitations.

Parent-Teacher Synergy

One of the significant findings of this study is the improved collaboration between parents and teachers, which is crucial for children's development (Grant & Ray, 2010; Hikmah et al., 2021). This collaboration fosters a better learning environment and strengthens the community's role in supporting children's education. However, the study also found that if parents have a traditional view of education, emphasizing academic skills over experiential learning, children may not fully embrace experiential activities. This parental influence mirrors global findings that suggest parental expectations can significantly shape children's learning experiences (Yafie et al., 2024; Hasibuan et al., 2022; Irawati et al., 2023; Ndari & Mahmudah, 2023; Nuraini et al., 2024; Rakhman & Surur, 2024).

These findings align with global trends in experiential learning. Countries such as Singapore have successfully implemented real-world and project-based learning strategies to enhance students' problem-solving and critical thinking skills (Tan, 2021). In various international contexts, challenges such as teacher readiness and resistance to non-traditional learning approaches remain common, underscoring the importance of sustained professional development (Mak, Lau, & Alan, 2017; Bartle, 2015).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the implementation of experiential learning in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum shows promising results in enhancing cognitive development, skill acquisition, and parent-teacher synergy. However, the study also reveals significant challenges, particularly in terms of teacher preparedness and cultural resistance to non-traditional learning methods. To fully realize the potential of experiential learning, it is essential to address these challenges through comprehensive teacher training, resource development, and increased parental involvement. Moreover, a broader comparative analysis of international practices will enrich the ongoing

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conversation on curriculum innovation in early childhood education, ensuring that Indonesia's educational reforms align with global best practices.

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